

•WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY•

*The Co-operative Way.*

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND WORKER CO-OPERATIVES

### Co-operative Development Program



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orker co-operatives, like any enterprise, may choose to include affirmative action in their employment practice. This means that they recognise the existence of inequality in the labour market and wish to follow policies to bring about greater equality within their own enterprise.

Affirmative action aims to reduce inequality of labour market opportunity for specific individuals or groups of individuals and thus provide those individuals with opportunities which may otherwise be denied them.

In some ways, worker co-operatives are particularly well suited to implement affirmative action. There is a close association between the ideals of affirmative action and those of equality, democracy, on-the-job training and employment generation to which worker co-operatives adhere.

In fact some worker co-operatives can actually start up in response to inequality of opportunities in employment, either within a certain locality or within a specific social group. The social objective which binds the co-operative together may be that of creating jobs for themselves.

Since the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and, prior to that, the various State Equal Opportunity Laws, discriminatory employment practices are illegal. But there is a difference between non-discriminatory (equal opportunity) practice and affirmative action. The degree to which any worker co-operative chooses to follow affirmative employment practice is up to them.

### SOME DEFINITIONS

Equal opportunity and affirmative action are new and unfamiliar concepts for most people. The group who most frequently benefit by implementation of those programs is women. The concepts and practices of equal opportunity and affirmative action are just as applicable to others under-represented in employment—Aborigines, migrants, ex-offenders, people with disabilities.

There are basically three different approaches to equalising opportunities in the workforce which can be used singly or in combination. They are:

#### • Equal Opportunity

Equal opportunity refers to eliminating specific bars to employment such as marital status or ethnicity and instead, awarding jobs on the basis of merit alone. By removing discriminatory bars, everyone has an equal chance of obtaining employment. Further, job promotion will go to the candidate best able to do the job.

#### • Affirmative Action

Affirmative action goes further than equal opportunity. Affirmative action programs stress the present effects of past discrimination and emphasise the need for special measures to assist people develop their own potential. Supporters of affirmative action programs would argue that, by themselves, equal opportunity policies can neither account for the low number of, for example, women in non-traditional jobs nor address the reasons

why women are not applying for/getting those jobs. Affirmative action embodies the merit principle. The definition of merit may be expanded to include skills potentially held by job applicants. Because affirmative action emphasises the need for special training, positions may be given to a candidate who may not appear to be the best qualified but who shows ability and potential.

#### • Positive Discrimination

Positive discrimination is the third, most radical tier in implementing equal opportunity. Positive discrimination programs act in favor of giving jobs/promotions to specifically targetted groups in preference to those whose employment chances are greater. Organisations may set a target (ie 40% female employees in two years time, up from 30%) and practice positive discrimination till the target is reached. Positive discrimination programs represent the swiftest method of equalising the balance and emphasise the concept of equality of outcome.



Photos: Brunswick Italo Australian Employment Co-operative

The approaches described above refer to equalising opportunities for individual workers.

Groups of workers may be helped by specifically targetted projects. For example, a worker co-operative may choose to employ only people of aboriginal descent, only women, or only people from a minority ethnic group with the aim of giving those people employment opportunities that may otherwise be denied to them. Under the terms of the Equal Opportunity Legislation it is quite legal for such groups to exist if their purpose is to promote opportunities for members of that disadvantaged group. Such an approach is well suited to the co-operative structure which is based, in part, upon the existence of a common bond amongst members.

#### AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: WHO BENEFITS?

The Victorian Government supports affirmative action to assist groups under-represented in the workforce. The Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs supports affirmative action policies within employing bodies, including worker co-operatives.

Affirmative action policies are targetted to two groups:

- those who make decisions about who gets employed/promoted/trained;
- those groups or individuals who, owing to a combination of economic and social factors have substantially unequal labour market opportunities when seeking work or promotion.

Affirmative action is based on recognition of the fact that it is not sufficient to make specific acts of discrimination unlawful.

Steps are needed to relieve the effects of past discrimination and to provide people with the necessary skills to increase their employment chances. Levels and type of assistance needed will vary from group to group and within groups but may encompass a range of strategies such as:

- changing attitudes in employer policy on hiring;
- confidence building for disadvantaged workers;
- intensive training;
- childcare provision;
- accessibility for disabled workers;
- job placement assistance;
- understanding labour market patterns;
- establishment of specifically targetted employment projects;
- broadening of the merit principle to encompass skills not usually recognised.

Worker co-operatives have the power to avoid discriminatory employment practices and can, by their policies and actions, ensure an equitable workplace. When so doing, the question of economic viability must be addressed and the impact of various employment practices assessed. The mix between social objectives and economic objectives is always of critical importance in worker co-operatives. The successful implementation of affirmative action is yet another example.

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